

The Syntax of the Verb "Happen"*

Dale E. Elliott

*Sponsored in part by the National Science Foundation through Grant GN 534.1 from the Office of Science Information Service to the Computer and Information Science Research Center, The Ohio State University.

The Syntax of the Verb "Happen"

In a paper appearing in this volume,¹ Lee has provided

¹A version of Lee's paper was read to the 1968 Summer meeting of the Linguistic Society of America.

evidence for the appearance of the verb "occur" in the underlying structures of non-stative sentences.² In this way, he accounts

²For a discussion of stative and non-stative verbs and adjectives, see Lakoff (1965).

for paraphrase relationships such as:

(1) John collapsed in the garden.

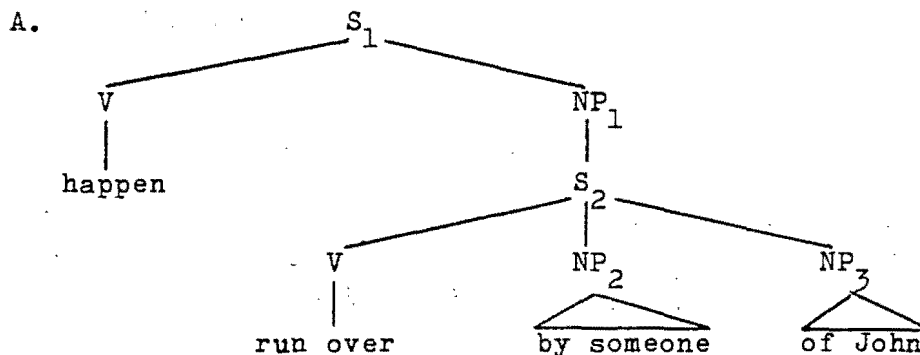
(2) John's collapsing occurred in the garden.

Sentence (3) is also a paraphrase of (1) and (2),

(3) John's collapsing happened in the garden.

and thus "happen" must also be considered here. This study analyzes in somewhat more detail structures containing the verb "happen". It will assume, as does Lee's paper, the correctness of evidence provided by Fillmore and others for putting the verb first in underlying structures, and will also make use of certain concepts provided by Fillmore in his "The Case for Case."

Consider the following structure:



This structure, with details of tense, etc., added, provides for:

(4) Someone ran over John.

and

(5) John was run over by someone.

In both these sentences, "happen" is deleted. (4) is derived by subject-formation applied to NP₂ with both prepositions deleted. Deriving (5) from the underlying representation above, of course, assumes the existence of a passive transformation. The preposition "of" appears in a nominalization such as

(6) The running over of John was a tragedy.

If subject-formation is applied to NP₁, with S₂ then being nominalized, and "happen" retained as the verb, we get what is probably an ungrammatical sentence:

(7) *Someone's running over John happened.³

³However, see below, page 30.

However, if there is an adverb or locative phrase present, there is at least a reduction in unacceptability:

(8) Someone's running over John happened yesterday.

(9) ?Someone's running over John happened at the corner of Broad and High.

Or, with passivization of S₂:

(10) John's being run over happened yesterday.

(11) ?John's being run over happened at the corner of Broad and High.

It may be problematic whether replacing "happened" with "occurred" in (7) will give a grammatical sentence:

(12) ?Someone's running over John occurred.

There would probably be disagreement among native speakers about this point. For somewhat firmer evidence as to the relationship between "happen" and "occur", consider sentences such as the following:

(13) What happened was that John was run over.

(14) What occurred was that John was run over.

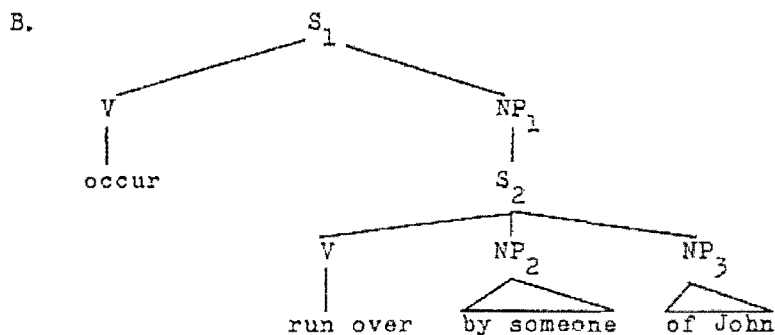
(15) What happened to John was that he was run over.

(16) *What occurred to John was that he was run over.⁴

⁴"Occur" takes a dative in another meaning of course. E.g., "It occurred to me that I should go to Chicago." means "The idea came to me that I should go to Chicago." There seems to be an element of chance or unexpectedness involved here also. Another paraphrase could be "The idea happened to come to me that I should go to Chicago."

No attempt will be made here to formulate a rule for the derivation of these pseudo-cleft sentences, but presumably (13) could be derived by such a rule from the deep structure given above. This presupposes, of course, that (13) is in fact a paraphrase of (4) and (5), and that the pseudo-cleft construction in (13) expresses only an emphasis of some sort, the semantic content of which is not sufficient to warrant a different underlying representation. I believe that this is the case.

(14), then, could be derived in the same way from the following deep structure:

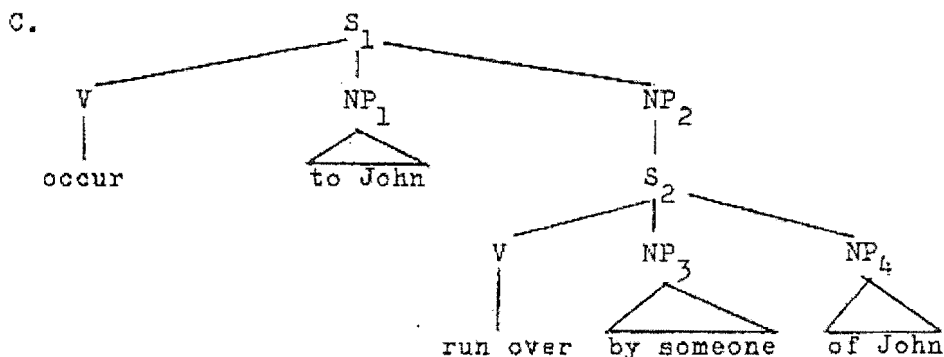


This structure, obviously, is identical to the first one above except that here the verb of S_1 is "occur" instead of "happen." Since (13) and (14) are paraphrases of each other, we can propose that this second structure is common to both, with "occur" here representing an abstract verb with two surface forms, "happen" and "occur."

Now consider sentences (15) and (16). My own interpretation of (15) is that "happen" is used here as a neutral expression to refer to some event, but that this event involved "John" in a particular way. We can use Fillmore's "Dative" case to express John's role in (15).⁵ (16), on the other hand, is distinctly

⁵Note that if the Dative is not present, it is not felt that someone was necessarily involved as Dative, but that the Dative NP was deleted. For example, in the sentence, "What happened was that someone fired a gun," we do not automatically infer that someone else was shot.

ungrammatical. We may say, therefore, that (15) is derived from the following structure, and that "occur" appears as "happen" obligatorily in this case because of the presence of the dative in NP_1 .



In (15), S_2 has been passivized. If this is not done, we get (17):

(17) What happened to John was that someone ran over him.

Thus it is clear that in this structure, NP_4 cannot carry the dative relationship to "occur," nor can NP_4 be a combination of dative and object.

To summarize, it has been proposed so far that "happen" is in certain cases an alternative surface form of an abstract verb "occur," that this verb takes an optional dative, and that if the dative is present, this verb is obligatorily represented as "happen."

Now consider some additional sentences with "happen," and their relationship to some of the structures discussed above.

(18) It happened that someone ran over John.

(19) It happened that John was run over.

(20) Someone happened to run over John.

(21) John happened to be run over.

There are a number of observations that can be made about these sentences. First, they are all paraphrases of each other. Second, I have a reasonably strong intuition that the verb "happen" in (18)-(21) is not used merely to express some event.⁶ Rather, it

⁶There may be a point of relevance here to the rather poorly understood grammar of English modals. For me, the following two sentences are not paraphrases of each other.

(i) It happened that I had a blowout on my car.

(ii) It was the case that I had a blowout on my car.

The reason for this is that (ii) is a neutral statement of an

event, but (i) is not, differing in this respect in the ways mentioned above. However, the following two sentences are paraphrases:

(iii) If you strike the curb too sharply, it may happen that you will have a blowout on your car.

(iv) If you strike the curb too sharply, it may be the case that you will have a blowout on your car.

It is maintained here that "happen" does not take "that" complements when it is semantically equivalent to "occur." I.e., "happen" in

(v) It happened that I found a five-dollar bill. has only the non-"occur" interpretation. However, when a modal is present, this does not seem to be the case.

We might want to propose a common underlying structure for (iii) and (iv), one which would yield:

(vi) If you strike the curb too sharply, it may be the case that your having a blowout on your car will happen.

and also (iii) and (iv) above. But if we have, without the modal:

(vii) If you strike the curb too sharply, it is the case that your having a blowout on your car will happen.

we can obtain only:

(viii) If you strike the curb too sharply, it is the case that you will have a blowout on your car.

but not (in the desired sense):

(ix) *If you strike the curb too sharply, it happens that you will have a blowout on your car.

The neutral interpretation of "happen" in (iii) appears to be the result of the presence of the modal "may."

Further examples include:

(x) Judging from the evidence, it must have happened that the victim was shot from very close range.

(xi) It could have happened that Fred took an earlier plane, since he has already checked out of the hotel.

expresses the additional fact that the event was in some way unexpected, that there was an element of chance, or, if you will, "happenstance" involved. The same thing can be found in (22).

(22) I happened upon a nice little Italian restaurant.
(22), I would say, is paraphrased by (23) and (24).

(23) I happened to find a nice little Italian restaurant.

(24) It happened that I found a nice little Italian restaurant.

Of course, claiming that (22)-(24) are paraphrases of each other involves one in peculiar problems concerning "find" and "upon," but the point I wish to make is that the force of "happen" in (18)-(21) is in some sense equivalent to its force in (22).

Thirdly, the following sentences are all ungrammatical:

(25) *It occurred that someone ran over John.

(26) *It occurred that John was run over.

(27) *Someone occurred to run over John.

(28) *John occurred to be run over.

Fourthly, the following are at least peripherally grammatical:

(29) Someone's happening to run over John $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{occurred} \\ \text{happened} \end{array} \right\}$
yesterday.

(30) John's happening to be run over $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{occurred} \\ \text{happened} \end{array} \right\}$
yesterday.

Note that the structures underlying (29) and (30) must be made available in order to account for dialogues like the following:

"Someone happened to run over John."

"When did it $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{occur} \\ \text{happen} \end{array} \right\}$?"

"It $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{occurred} \\ \text{happened} \end{array} \right\}$ yesterday."

"John happened to be run over."

"When did it $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{occur} \\ \text{happen} \end{array} \right\}$. ?"

"It $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{occurred} \\ \text{happened} \end{array} \right\}$ yesterday."

Furthermore, the question "Where did it $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{occur} \\ \text{happen} \end{array} \right\}$?" can also be asked, forcing us to allow for the occurrence of locative

phrases in structures like those underlying (29) and (30). Also, to:

"Someone happened to run over John."

one may reply:

"I don't believe that it happened."

The structure underlying the embedded sentence here must be one which would yield (7).

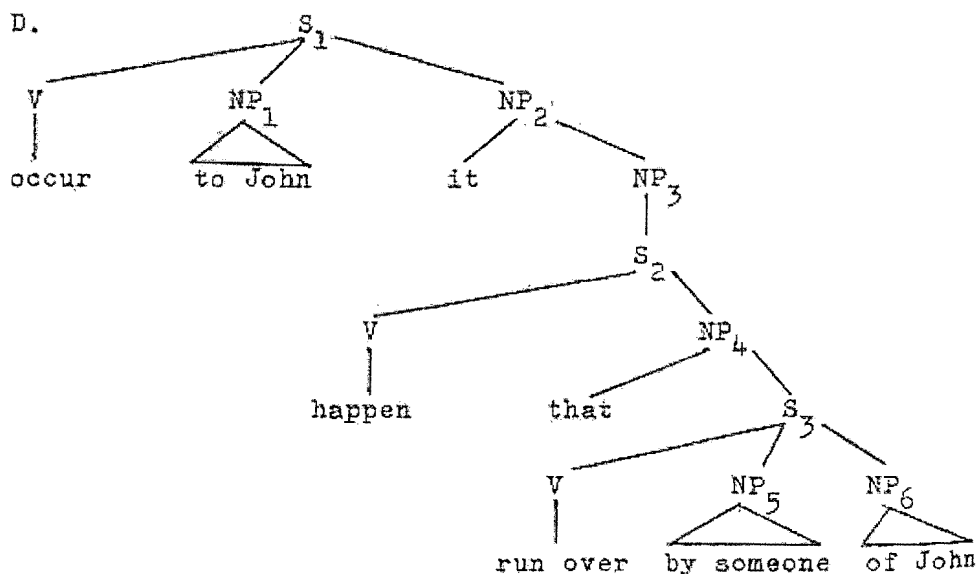
Finally, we have the following pseudo-cleft sentences:

(31) What { occurred
happened } was that John happened to be run over.

(32) What { occurred
happened } was that someone happened to run over John.

(31) and (32) are probably also acceptable with the dative NP "to John," given the appropriate pronoun adjustments, and replacement of "occurred" with "happened."

We can, then, propose the following deep structure:



If the dative NP₁ is not present, and the V "occur" of S₁ is deleted, we obtain, with further necessary operations, sentences (18)-(21). If S₂ is nominalized and there is an adverb present, we get (29) or (30), depending on whether or not S₃ is passivized. If the pseudo-cleft transformation is applied, we get (31) or (32), or their respective counterparts with the dative "to John" if it is present in the deep structure.

Note that in this structure the main verb of S₂ is "happen" and not "occur." The most important reason for this, I think, is the semantic difference between the verb "happen" and the verb "occur," which, as noted, appears in certain environments as "happen." This permits us to say that "occur" appears in deep structure only as the main verb of the highest S in non-stative sentences, whereas "happen" is an instance of noun-phrase complementation, as suggested by Rosenbaum.⁷

⁷This is somewhat oversimplified. Cf. Peter Rosenbaum, (1967), p. 74.

It should be pointed out that it is somewhat too general to say that "occur" appears only in non-stative sentences, since although (33) is ungrammatical, (34) is acceptable.

(33) *What happened was that John was tall.

(34) What happened was that John remembered his lesson.

Notice, however, that (35) is also probably acceptable.

(35) What happened was that John was too tall for the police force.

Although "occur" may appear in a stative sentence like (34), it does not permit a dative in this case, nor is a dative permissible with an adjective like "tall."

(36) *What happened to John was that he remembered his lesson.

(37) *What happened to John was that he was tall.

I am not sure about (38).

- (38) ?What happened to John was that he was too tall
for the police force.⁸

⁸J. R. Ross, in a comment on Lee's paper at the 1968 Summer LSA meeting, brought up a sentence which, as I remember it, was approximately the following:

- (i) All this meteorite has to do to disprove your theory is to contain nitrogen.

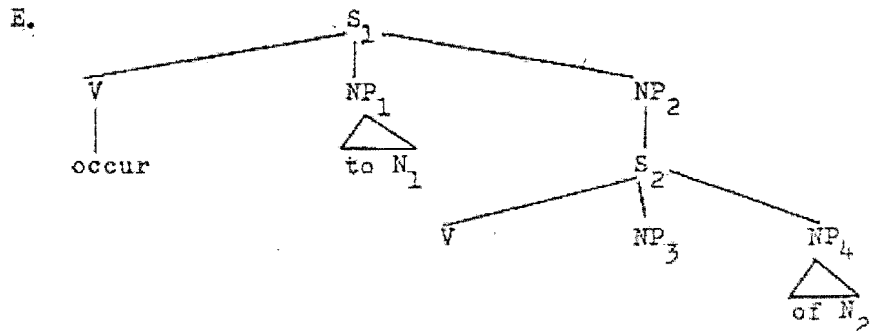
This is essentially paraphrased by:

- (ii) All that has to happen to disprove your theory is for this meteorite to contain nitrogen.

Contain, of course, is a stative verb.

Depending on the classes of sentences one accepts and rejects, the possibilities for S in the pattern

What happened to N was that S
may present some peculiar semantic problems.



From a deep structure like E, we may derive a pattern like the above provided that N_1 in the dative $NP_1 = N_2$, and N_2 is object or equivalent to the N in the agent NP_3 . That is, we may have:

- (39) What happened to John was that someone ran over him. (= 17)

- (40) What happened to John was that he killed himself.

but (41) and (42) appear to be deviant:

- (41) What happened to John was that someone ran over Mary.

(42) What happened to John was that Harry killed himself.

This would predict that (43) and (44) are also deviant:

(43) What happened to John was that he gave Mary a flower.

(44) What happened to John was that he sold his car.

But the following seem acceptable:

(45) What happened to John was that he jumped off a cliff.

(46) What happened to John was that there was a snow-storm and he can't get out of his house.

If it is true that, if the conditions given above on a deep structure like E are satisfied, we may then derive sentences following the pattern of (39) and (40), then these conditions should be retained, since, as was noted, they account for the deviance of (41)-(44). It may remain then, to account for (45) and (46) and many similar sentences by considering that the complement S's in (45) and (46) are, let us say, "malefactive." Presumably, some suitable formalism could be devised for this purpose.

Of course, it is possible to invent situations in which sentences like (43) and (44) are acceptable. For example, John may have a black eye and Irving asks Hortense "What happened to John?" and Hortense replies "(43)." This would be acceptable as an answer if both Irving and Hortense knew independently of this particular situation that Mary customarily gives black eyes to people who give her flowers. Still, it is the case that falling off cliffs and being snowbound are, as a rule, immediately recognized as being undesirable, but giving people flowers and selling one's car are not. Nevertheless, I would be wary of trying to make a serious issue out of this point.

I still maintain that (43) and (44) are somehow odd, but a further complication is introduced by such completely acceptable sentences as (47):

(47) Being chosen Miss America was the greatest thing

that ever happened to Ernestine Heffelfinger of
Chillicothe, Ohio.

References

Fillmore, Charles J. 1968. "The Case for Case." E. Bach and R. Harms, eds. Universals in Linguistic Theory. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc.

Lakoff, George. 1965. On the Nature of Syntactic Irregularity. Report No. NSF-16, Harvard University Computational Laboratory.

Lee, P. Gregory. 1968. "Do from occur." Working Papers in Linguistics No. 3, pp. 1-21.

Rosenbaum, Peter S. 1967. The Grammar of English Predicate Complement Constructions. M.I.T. Press.